

René Guénon

Harry Oldmeadow

...there are those whose vocation it is to provide the keys with which the treasury of wisdom of other traditions can be unlocked, revealing to those who are destined to receive this wisdom the essential unity and universality and at the same the formal diversity of tradition and revelation.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr¹

Ananda Coomaraswamy:

...the least important thing about Guénon is his personality or biography... The fact is he has the invisibility that is proper to the complete philosopher: our teleology can only be fulfilled when we really become no one.²

The American traditionalist, Whitall Perry, who knew Guénon personally, speaks of his "outer anonymity" and of this "austere yet benevolent figure... ungraspable and remote".³ There is indeed something elusive and enigmatic about René Guénon the man. He left a formidable legacy of writings which testify to his achievements as a metaphysician but his personal life remains shrouded in obscurity. In France he has always commanded a small but dedicated following and academic interest in Guénon shows some sign of burgeoning there. Elsewhere he remains a shadowy figure whose name occasionally crops up in reference to French occultism or his pioneering study (in the West) of *Advaita* Vedanta. The growing interest in Guénon has generated no small amount of controversy amongst French scholars about some aspects of his life, especially in the years from 1906 to 1912.⁴ Here we shall confine ourselves to a biographical sketch which leaves aside some of these unresolved questions and includes only such material for which there appears to be persuasive evidence and reputable authority.⁵ Furthermore, we shall only be interested in those aspects of his life which might shed light on his work.

René Guénon was born in Blois in 1886. He grew up in a strict Catholic environment and was schooled by Jesuits. As a young man he moved to Paris to take up studies in mathematics at the Collège Rollin. Maths remained a lifelong interest and a few years before his death he published a short mathematical treatise, *Les principes du calcul infinitésimal*. However, his energies were soon diverted from academic studies and in 1905 he abandoned his preparation for *Grandes Écoles*. For the next seven years, seized by what Anatole France called "the vertigo of the invisible", Guénon submerged himself in *fin-de-siècle* French occultism.⁶ He became a leading member in several secret societies - theosophical, spiritualistic, masonic and "gnostic".

Guénon's involvement in the occultist underground seems to have been somewhat indiscriminate. From the vantage-point of his later work it was a murky and bizarre period in his life, one of which he apparently did not care to be reminded. Nevertheless, Guénon learned a good deal in this period and indeed, he was eventually to become one of the most unsparing critics of these occultists movements.

1* This essay appeared in the 1995 edition of Guénon's *The Reign of Quantity, Sophia Perrenis et Universalis, New York*. It also comprises a chapter in *Traditionalism: religion in the light of the perennial philosophy, Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, 2000*.

Abbreviations used in footnotes:

AKC BL	A. Coomaraswamy	<i>The Bugbear of Literacy</i>
AKC SL	A. Coomaraswamy	<i>Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy</i>
RG CMW	R. Guénon	<i>Crisis of the Modern World</i>
RG RQ	R. Guénon	<i>The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times</i>
RF UT	R. Fernando ed	<i>The Unanimous Tradition</i>
RL CLW	R. Lipsey	<i>Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work</i>
SCR		<i>Studies in Comparative Religion</i>
SHN K&S	S.H. Nasr	<i>Knowledge and the Sacred</i>
SS ACRR	S.D.R. Singam ed	<i>Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again</i>

S.H. Nasr *Sufi Essays* Allen & Unwin, London, 1972; p126.

2 Letter to Kurt Leidecker, November 1941, AKC SL pp49-50.

3 W. Perry: "Coomaraswamy: the Man, Myth and History" SCR XI, iii, 1977; p160 and "The Man and the Witness" in SS ACRR p6.

4 Some of these controversies have been dispassionately discussed in J.P. Laurant: "Le problème de René Guénon, ou Quelques questions posées par les rapports de sa vie et de son oeuvre" *Revue de l'Histoire des religions* CLXXIX, i, 1971; pp41-70.

5 The only English-language biography is R. Waterfield *René Guénon and the Future of the West* Crucible, London, 1987.

6 France's phrase is cited in M. Eliade: "The Occult and the Modern World" in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions* Uni of Chicago, 1976; p51.

In the context of the present study it is not necessary to unravel all the details of Guénon's participation in various secret societies. However, it is worth pausing to reflect on the significance of this period in his life. In its sociological dimension occultism provided, as doubtless it still does, a framework for the repudiation of the bourgeois ideologies and institutions of the day. Most of the occult groups turned to the archaic past in search of authentic spiritual values against which modern civilisation was measured and found wanting. As Mircea Eliade has observed,

...involvement with the occult represented for the French literary and artistic avant-garde one of the most efficient criticisms and rejections of the religious and cultural values of the West - efficient because it was considered to be based on historical facts.⁷

Although Guénon was to disown the philosophical and historical assumptions on which such movements were built and to contrast their "counterfeit spirituality" with what he came to see as genuine expressions of esotericism, as a traditionalist he remained steadfastly opposed to contemporary European civilisation.

Some of the occult movements stimulated a study of ancient esoteric traditions in Egypt, Persia, India and China, and directed attention towards the sacred writings of the East. Precisely how Guénon came to a serious study of Taoism, Hinduism and Islam remains unclear but it seems likely that it was through his involvement in one of the occultist groups. Whitall Perry has suggested that the "catalyzing element" was Guénon's contact in Paris with some Indians of the *Advaita* school.⁸ The facts of the matter are far from clear and there is insufficient evidence to make speculation fruitful. Guénon always kept a cloak of secrecy tightly wrapped around his own spiritual life.

In June 1909, Guénon founded the occultist journal *La Gnose*, subtitled '*organe de l'Eglise gnostique universelle*'. It lasted a little over two years and carried most of his writings from this period which, although they exhibit some rationalistic and anti-religious bias, demonstrate a familiarity with Vedanta.

It can be said that Guénon's life certainly entered a new phase in 1912, one marked by his marriage to a devout Catholic. He emerged from the rather subterranean world of the occultists and now moved freely in an intensely Catholic milieu, leading a busy social and intellectual life. He was influenced by several prominent Catholic intellectuals of the day, among them Jacques Maritain, Fathers Peilleaube and Sertillanges, and one M. Milhaud who conducted classes at the Sorbonne on the philosophy of science. The years 1912 to 1930 were the most public of Guénon's life. He attended lectures at the Sorbonne, wrote and published widely, gave public lectures himself and maintained many social and intellectual contacts. He published his first books in the 1920s and soon became well known for his work on philosophical and metaphysical subjects.

Whatever Guénon's personal commitments may have been during this period his thought had clearly undergone a major shift away from occultism towards an interest in sapiential traditions within the framework of the great religions. One of the foci of interest for Guénon was the possibility of a Christian esotericism within the Catholic tradition. (He always remained somewhat ignorant of the esoteric dimensions of Eastern Orthodoxy.⁹) Olivier de Fremont, a friend of those years, wrote of Guénon's letters from this period, "*Les vieilles lettres que j'ai de lui respirent un parfait esprit catholique.*"¹⁰ Guénon envisaged, in some of his work in this period, a regenerated Catholicism, enriched and invigorated by a recovery of her esoteric traditions and "repaired" through a *prise de conscience*¹¹. He contributed regularly to the Catholic journal *Regnabit*, the Sacré-Coeur review founded and edited by P. Anizan. These articles reveal the re-orientation of Guénon's thinking in which "tradition" now becomes the controlling theme. Some of these periodical writings found their way into his later books.

The years 1927 to 1930 mark another transition in Guénon's life, culminating in his move to Cairo in 1930 and his open commitment to Islam. A conflict between Anizan (whom Guénon supported) and the Archbishop of Rheims, and adverse Catholic criticism of his book *Le roi du monde* (1927) compounded a growing disillusionment with the Church and hardened Guénon's suspicion that it had surrendered to the "temporal and material". In January 1928 Guénon's wife died rather abruptly. Following a series of fortuitous circumstances Guénon left on a three month visit to Cairo.¹² He was to remain there until his death in 1951.

In Cairo Guénon was initiated into the Sufic order of Shadilites and invested with the name Abdel Wahed Yahya. He married again and lived a modest and retiring existence.

7 M. Eliade: *op.cit.*; p53.

8 W. Perry: "The Revival of Interest in Tradition" in RF *UT* pp8-9.

9 Guénon's view of Christianity has been discussed in P.L. Reynolds *René Guénon: His Life and Work* (unpublished) pp9ff. See also B. Kelly: "Notes on the Light of the Eastern Religions" in *RH* pp160-161.

10 Quoted in J.P. Laurant: "Le problème..." p57. (Trans: "These old letters I have from him breathe a perfect Catholic spirit.")

11 *ibid.*; pp57-59. See RG *CMW* pp95-96.

12 J.P. Laurant: "Le problème..." p60.

...such was his anonymity that an admirer of his writings was dumbfounded to discover that the venerable next door neighbour whom she had known for years as Sheikh Abdel Wahed Yahya was in reality René Guénon.¹³

A good deal of Guénon's energies were directed in the 1930s to a massive correspondence he carried on with his readers in Europe, often people in search of some kind of initiation, others simply pressing inquiries about subjects dealt with in Guénon's books and articles. Most of Guénon's published work after his move to Cairo appeared in *Études Traditionnelles* (until 1937 *Le Voile d'Isis*), a formerly theosophical journal which under Guénon's influence was transformed into the principal European forum for traditionalist thought. It was only the war which provided Guénon with enough respite from his correspondence to devote himself to the writing of some of his major works including *The Reign of Quantity* (1945).

In his later years Guénon was much preoccupied with questions concerning initiation into authentic esoteric traditions. He published at least twenty-five articles in *Études Traditionnelles* dealing with this subject from many different angles. Although he had found his own resting-place within the fold of Islam, Guénon remained interested in the possibility of genuine initiatic channels surviving within Christianity. He also never entirely relinquished his interest in Freemasonry and returned to this subject in some of his last writings. It was only shortly before his death that he concluded there was no effective hope of an esoteric regeneration within either masonry or Catholicism.

The relationship between Guénon's life and his work has engaged the attention of several scholars. Jean-Pierre Laurant has suggested that his intellectual, spiritual and ritual life only achieved a harmonious resolution after his move to Cairo and within the protective embrace of Islam.¹⁴ P.L. Reynolds has charted the influence of his French and Catholic background on his work.¹⁵ Others, especially those committed to traditionalism themselves, have argued that Guénon's whole adult life represents a witness to an unchanging vision of the truth and that his participation in occultism was part of this function. Such commentators suggest that his thought does not "evolve" but only shifts ground as Guénon responds to changing circumstances. Thus Michel Valsan, a collaborator on *Études Traditionnelles*, writes:

*Il convient de préciser en l'occurrence que le privilège spécial qu'a cette oeuvre de jouer le rôle de critère de vérité, de régularité et de plénitude traditionnelle devant la civilisation occidentale dérive du caractère sacré et non-inviduel qu'a revêtu la fonction de René Guénon. L'homme qui devait accomplir cette fonction fut certainement préparé de loin et non pas improvisé. Les matrices de la Sagesse avaient prédisposé et formé son entité selon une économie précise, et sa carrière s'accomplit dans le temps par une corrélation constante entre ses possibilités et les conditions cycliques extérieures.*¹⁶

Each of these kinds of claims carries some legitimacy. The shaping influence of his own background and period is obvious enough in his work. Nor is there any point in denying that, looked at as a whole, Guénon's thought does undergo a radical change between about 1910 and 1914. While much of his early work remains interesting and often illuminating it cannot be said to represent a strictly traditionalist view such as we find in his later works. Given Guénon's education and background he could not have come to a traditionalist understanding without passing through a period in which he would learn to shed some modernistic (which is to say, anti-traditional) views and assumptions. To borrow one of his own favourite images, his early work is not without fissures which left it vulnerable to some of the more fanciful theories of the occultists. However, if we leave aside a few jejune writings from these early years, Guénon's work does exhibit an arresting consistency, an apparently intuitive grasp of metaphysical and cosmological principles and an authoritative explication of the *sophia perennis*. One commentator has observed that after the occultist period Guénon only revised his position on two substantial issues: the authenticity of Buddhism as an integral tradition and the initiatic possibilities of freemasonry.¹⁷ If we add to this his changing attitude to the revival of Christian esotericism we have indeed catalogued all the radical revisions in Guénon's work in almost forty years. We shall return to this aspect of Guénon's achievement in discussing his own perception of the role he had to play.

13 W. Perry: "Coomaraswamy" p160.

14 J.P. Laurant: *op.cit.*; pp66-69.

15 P.L. Reynolds: *op.cit.*; *passim*. These influences, Reynolds argues, account for various imbalances and inadvertencies in Guénon's work.

16 M. Valsan in the Special Issue of *Études Traditionnelles: Le Sort de l'Occident*, Nov 1951. (Trans: It is useful to clarify in the present case that the special privilege of truth which belongs to this work of playing the role of truth, regularity and traditional plenitude in the face of Western civilisation derives from the sacred and non-individual character that clothed the function of René Guénon. The man who had to accomplish this function would certainly have been prepared from long ago rather than improvising [his role]. The matrices of Wisdom had predisposed and formed his being according to a precise economy, and his career fulfilled itself in time by a constant correlation between his possibilities and the exterior cyclic conditions [of the age].)

17 M. Bastriocchi: "The Last Pillars of Wisdom" in *SS ACRR* p359, fn8. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes of the lack of "development" in Guénon's work that it was "as if he had written them all [his books] at one sitting and then published them over the next few decades." *SHN K&S* p101.

Guénon was a prolific writer. He published seventeen books during his lifetime, and at least eight posthumous collections and compilations have since appeared. Here we shall take only an overview of his work. The *oeuvre* exhibits certain recurrent motifs and preoccupations and is, in a sense, all of a piece. Guénon's understanding of tradition is the key to his work. As early as 1909 we find Guénon writing of "...the Primordial Tradition which, in reality, is the same everywhere, regardless of the different shapes it takes in order to be fit for every race and every historical period."¹⁸ As the English traditionalist, Gai Eaton, has observed, Guénon

believes that there exists a Universal Tradition, revealed to humanity at the beginning of the present cycle of time, but partially lost... his primary concern is less with the detailed forms of this Tradition and the history of its decline than with its kernel, the pure and changeless knowledge which is still accessible to man through the channels provided by traditional doctrine...¹⁹

The existence of a Primordial Tradition embodying a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles from which derive a succession of traditions each expressing these principles in forms determined by a given Revelation and by the exigencies of the particular situation, is axiomatic in Guénon's work.²⁰ It is a first principle which admits of no argument; nor does it require any kind of "proof" or "demonstration", historical or otherwise.

Guénon's work, from his earliest writings in 1909 onwards, can be seen as an attempt to give a new expression and application to the timeless principles which inform all traditional doctrines. In his writings he ranges over a vast terrain - Vedanta, the Chinese tradition, Christianity, Sufism, folklore and mythology from all over the world, the secret traditions of gnosticism, alchemy, the Kabbalah, and so on, always intent on excavating their underlying principles and showing them to be formal manifestations of the one Primordial Tradition. Certain key themes run through all of his writings and one meets again and again with such notions as these: the concept of metaphysics transcending all other doctrinal orders; the identification of metaphysics and the "formalisation", so to speak, of gnosis (or *jñāna* if one prefers); the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric domains; the hierarchic superiority and infallibility of intellectual knowledge; the contrast of the modern Occident with the traditional Orient; the spiritual bankruptcy of modern European civilisation; a cyclical view of Time, based largely on the Hindu doctrine of cosmic cycles; a contra-evolutionary view of history. Many of these key ideas will be explored in greater detail later in this study, especially as they have found expression in the work of Frithjof Schuon. Here we shall confine ourselves to a few general remarks and to a brief look at the Guénonian corpus.

Guénon gathered together doctrines and principles from diverse times and places but emphasized that the enterprise was a synthetic one which envisaged formally divergent elements in their principal unity rather than a syncretic one which press-ganged incongruous forms into an artificial unity. This distinction is a crucial one not only in Guénon's work but in traditionalism as a whole.²¹

Guénon repeatedly turned to oriental wisdoms, believing that it was only in the East that various sapiential traditions remained more or less intact. It is important not to confuse this Eastward-looking stance with the kind of sentimental exoticism nowadays so much in vogue. As Coomaraswamy noted,

If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern but because this is metaphysics. If "Eastern" metaphysics differed from a "Western" metaphysics - one or the other would not be metaphysics.²²

One of Guénon's translators made the same point in suggesting that if Guénon turns so often to the East it is because the West is in the position of the

foolish virgins who, through the wandering of their attention in other directions, had allowed their lamps to go out; in order to rekindle the sacred fire, which in its essence is always the same wherever it may be burning, they must have recourse to the lamps still kept alight.²³

The contrast between the riches of traditional civilisations and the spiritual impoverishment of modern Europe sounds like a refrain through Guénon's writings. In all his work

Guénon's mission was twofold: to reveal the metaphysical roots of the "crisis of the modern world" and to explain the ideas behind the authentic and esoteric teachings that still remained alive... in the East.²⁴

¹⁸ R. Guénon: "La Demiurge" *La Gnose* 1909; per M. Bastriocchi: *op.cit.*; p351.

¹⁹ G. Eaton *The Richest Vein* Faber & Faber, London, 1949; pp188-189.

²⁰ The relationship between the Primordial Tradition and the various traditions needs clarification in that while each tradition in fact derives its overall form and principal characteristics from a particular Revelation, it nevertheless carries over (in many of its aspects) certain essential features of the tradition which precedes it.

²¹ See R. Guénon *The Symbolism of the Cross* Luzac, London, 1958; pp. x-xi and RG *CMW* p9 & pp108ff.

²² Coomaraswamy in "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge", AKC *BL* pp72-73.

²³ Quoted in Gai Eaton *op.cit.*; p199.

²⁴ Jacob Needleman in his "Foreword" to JN *SG* pp11-12.

By way of an expedient we can divide Guénon's writings into five categories, each corresponding roughly with a particular period in his life: the occultist periodical writings of the pre-1912 period; the reaction against and critique of occultism, especially spiritualism and theosophy; writings on Oriental metaphysics; on aspects of the European tradition and on initiation; and, fifthly, the critique of modern civilisation. This is a rather arbitrary classification but it does help to identify some of the focal points in Guénon's work.

Guénon's earliest writings appeared, as we have seen, in the organs of French occultism. In the light of his later work some of this periodical literature must be considered somewhat ephemeral. Nonetheless the seeds of most of Guénon's work can be found in articles from this period. The most significant, perhaps, were five essays which appeared in *La Gnose* between September 1911 and February 1912, under the title "*La constitution de l'être humain et son évolution selon le Védānta*"; these became the opening chapters of one of his most influential studies, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, not published until 1925. Other writings from this period on such subjects as mathematics and the science of numbers, prayer and incantation, and initiation, all presage later work.

The shift in Guénon's intellectual orientation away from occultism is difficult to pinpoint precisely. However, as early as 1909 we find him attacking what he saw as the misconceptions and confusions abroad in the spiritualist movements.²⁵ Whilst his misgivings about many of the occultist groups were growing in the 1909-1912 period it was not until the publication of two of his earliest books that he mounted a full-scale critique: *Le théosophisme, histoire d'une pseudo religion* (1921) and *L'erreur spirite* (1923). The titles are suggestive: these were lacerating attacks not only on theosophy and spiritualism but also on the "gnostic" groups founded by a certain Dr. Encausse (who achieved some celebrity as "Papus"), and on movements such as Rosicrucianism. Guénon's exposé was not merely a polemical fusillade but a meticulously detailed analysis. Of the groups in which Guénon himself had been involved only the Masons escaped relatively unscathed. As Eliade has noted:

The most erudite and devastating critique of all these so-called occult groups was presented not by a rationalist outside observer, but by an author from the inner circle, duly initiated into some of their secret orders and well acquainted with their occult doctrines; furthermore, that critique was directed, not from a sceptical or positivistic perspective, but from what he called "traditional esotericism". This learned and intransigent critic was René Guénon.²⁶

The details of this demolition job need not concern us here but it is worth noting the main lines of Guénon's attack. The most fundamental part of Guénon's indictment was that such movements, far from preserving traditional esotericisms, were made up of a syncretic mish-mash of distorted and heterogeneous elements forced into a false unity, devoid of any authentic metaphysical framework. Thus they were vulnerable to the scientific ideologies of the day and inevitably fell prey to the intellectual confusions rampant in Europe. One of the most characteristic confusions of such groups, to cite but one example, was the mistaking of the psychic for the spiritual. Occultism as a whole he now saw as one of the "signs of the times", a symptom of the spiritual malaise in modern civilisation. Guénon took up some of these charges again in later works, especially *The Reign of Quantity*.

Guénon's interest in Eastern metaphysical traditions had been awakened some time around 1909 and some of his early articles in *La Gnose* are devoted to Vedantic metaphysics. His first book, *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921) marked Guénon as a commentator of rare authority. It also served notice of Guénon's role as a redoubtable critic of contemporary civilisation. Of this book Seyyed Hossein Nasr has written,

It was like a sudden burst of lightning, an abrupt intrusion into the modern world of a body of knowledge and a perspective utterly alien to the prevalent climate and world view and completely opposed to all that characterizes the modern mentality.²⁷

However, Guénon's axial work on Vedanta was published in 1925, *L'homme et son devenir selon le Védānta*. Other significant works in the field of oriental traditions include *La métaphysique orientale*, delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1925 but not published until 1939, *La Grande Triade*, based on Taoist doctrine, and many articles on such subjects as Hindu mythology, Taoism and Confucianism, and doctrines concerning reincarnation. Interestingly, Guénon remained more or less ignorant of the Buddhist tradition for many years, regarding it as no more than a "heterodox development" within Hinduism and without integrity as a formal religious tradition. It was only through the intervention of Marco Pallis, one of his translators, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, that Guénon revised his attitude to Buddhism.²⁸

25 R. Guénon: "La Gnose et les Ecoles Spiritualistes", *LA GNOSE* December, 1909. See also P. Charconac: "La vie simple de René Guénon" in the Special Issue of *ÉTUDES TRADITIONNELLES*, Nov. 1951; p321 and P.L. Reynolds: *op.cit.*; p3.

26 M. Eliade: *op.cit.*; p51.

27 SHN K&S p101

28 This change in Guénon's attitude has been documented and discussed by several commentators. See Marco Pallis: Letter to the Editor, *SCR* VII, iv; p73; K.E. Steffens: Letter to the Editor, *SCR* XI, ii, 1977; pp116-117; J.M. Murray: Letter to the Editor, *SCR* XI, ii, 1977; pp191-192; W. Perry: "The Man and the Witness" in *SS ACRR* p5 ;and M. Pallis: "A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A.K.

During the 1920s when Guénon was moving in the coteries of French Catholicism he turned his attention to some aspects of Europe's spiritual heritage. As well as numerous articles on such subjects as the Druids, the Grail, Christian symbolism and folkloric motifs, Guénon produced several major works in this field, including *L'esotérisme de Dante* (1925), *St Bernard* (1929), and *Le symbolisme de la croix* (1931). Another work, *Autorité spirituelle et pouvoir temporel* (1929) was occasioned by certain contemporary controversies. A collection of Guénon's writings on symbolism has recently appeared in English translation for the first time under the title *Fundamental Symbols of Sacred Science* (1995). The quintessential Guénon is to be found in two works which tied together some of his central themes: *La crise du monde moderne* (1927) and his masterpiece, *Le règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (1945). The themes of these two books had been rehearsed in an earlier work, *Orient et Occident* (1924). Each of these books mounted an increasingly elaborate and merciless attack on the foundations of the contemporary European worldview. We shall turn to the last of these works in some detail.

The Reign of Quantity is a magisterial summation of Guénon's work. It is, characteristically, a difficult work. He was quite unconcerned with reaching a wide audience and addressed the book to those few capable of understanding it "without any concern for the inevitable incomprehension of the others".²⁹ He set out to challenge nearly all of the intellectual assumptions current in Europe at the time. The book, he writes, is directed to

...the understanding of some of the darkest enigmas of the modern world, enigmas which the world itself denies because it is incapable of perceiving them although it carries them within itself, and because this denial is an indispensable condition for the maintenance of the special mentality whereby it exists.³⁰

At first sight the book ranges over a bewildering variety of subjects: the nature of time, space and matter as conceived in traditional and modern science; the philosophical foundations of such typically modern modes of thought as rationalism, materialism and empiricism; the significance of ancient crafts such as metallurgy; the nature of shamanism and sorcery; the "illusion of statistics"; the "misdeeds of psychoanalysis"; the "pseudo-initiatic" pretensions of spiritualism, theosophy and other "counterfeit" forms of spirituality; tradition and anti-tradition; the unfolding of cosmic and terrestrial cycles. Some study of the book reveals that these apparently disparate strands have been woven into a work of subtle design and dense texture. *The Reign of Quantity* is a brilliantly sustained and excoriating attack on modern civilisation. It has less polemical heat and moral indignation than some of his earlier works but is none the less effective for that. The book is a controlled and dispassionate but devastating razing of the assumptions and values of modern science. At the same time it is an affirmation of the metaphysical and cosmological principles given expression in traditional cultures and religions.

Guénon unfolds a startling thesis, in the light of the doctrine of cosmic cycles, about the present terrestrial situation. His vision is rooted in the Hindu conception of the *Kali-Yuga* but is not restricted to the purely Indian expression of this doctrine. There is a dark apocalyptic strain in the book which some readers are tempted to dismiss as the rantings of another doom-sayer. For Guénon the dire circumstances in which the modern world finds itself are largely to be explained through an elucidation of the cyclic doctrine whereby humankind is seen to be degenerating into an increasingly solidified and materialised state, more and more impervious to spiritual influences. Inversely, the world becomes increasingly susceptible to infernal forces of various kinds.³¹ The forced convergence of different civilisations is the spatial correlate of the temporal unfolding of the present terrestrial cycle, moving towards an inexorable cataclysm.

Guénon took the inevitable end of the world absolutely seriously.³² By the time of writing this book he believed there were no possible "remedies", no escape from the apocalypse. To some readers this looks like a "despairing pessimism" to which Guénon might have retorted that neither optimism nor pessimism had anything to do with the case. Moreover, what from one angle might be seen as a "worldly pessimism", appears from another as a "celestial optimism" since the end of a cycle marks its completion and the restoration of a true order.

Closely related to the doctrine of cycles is Guénon's profoundly challenging thesis about the nature of time, space and matter, one based on traditional cosmologies. Contrary to the claims of modern science, says Guénon, time and space do not constitute a kind of uniform continuum in the matrix of which events and material phenomena manifest themselves. Rather, time-and-space is a field of *qualitative* determinations and differences. In other words, the nature of time and space is not a constant, fixed datum but is subject to both quantitative and qualitative change. Any exclusively quantitative and materialistic science such as now tyrannises the European mind cannot accommodate this principle. It strives rather to reduce qualitatively determined phenomena to the

Coomaraswamy and René Guénon", *SCR* XII, iii & iv, 1978; pp180-181.

29 RG *RQ* p11.

30 *ibid.*

31 Herein, from the traditionalist viewpoint, lies the explanation for the modern excrescence of what Dr. Christopher Evans has called "cults of unreason" - scientology, UFO-ism, Lobsang Rampa-ism and so on. See C. Evans *Cults of Unreason* Harrap, London, 1973 and J. Webb: *op.cit.*

32 See J.P. Laurant: *op.cit.*; p58.

barren and mechanistic formulae of a profane and materialistic science. (One might add that some of the "discoveries" of physicists since Guénon's time have done nothing to disprove his thesis and indeed, to some minds, give it more credibility. Guénon himself would have argued that metaphysical and cosmological principles such as he was applying could in no way be affected by empirical considerations.³³)

Guénon's critique of scientism - the ideology of modern science - is something quite other than just another attack on scientific reductionism, although that surely is part of his case. Nor is it a catalogue of the inadequacies of this or that scientific theory. Rather, it is a radical and disturbing challenge to almost every postulate of modern European science. The critique hinges on the contrast between sacred, traditional sciences on the one hand, and a profane, materialistic science on the other. In an earlier work Guénon had elaborated the basis of this contrast in uncompromising terms:

Never until the present epoch had the study of the sensible world been regarded as self-sufficient; never would the science of this ephemeral and changing multiplicity have been judged truly worthy of the name of knowledge... According to the ancient conception... a science was less esteemed for itself than for the degree in which it expressed after its own fashion... a reflection of the higher immutable truth of which everything of any reality necessarily partakes... all science appeared as an extension of the traditional doctrine itself, as one of its applications, secondary and contingent no doubt... but still a veritable knowledge none the less...³⁴

For Guénon and the other traditionalists, the notion of a self-sufficient, self-validating, autonomous material science is a contradiction, an incongruity, for all sciences must have recourse to higher and immutable principles and truths. Science must be pursued in a metaphysical and cosmological framework which it cannot construct out of itself. In another work Guénon wrote that modern science,

in disavowing the principles [of traditional metaphysics and cosmology] and in refusing to re-attach itself to them, robs itself both of the highest guarantee and the surest direction it could have; there is no longer anything valid in it except knowledge of details, and as soon as it seeks to rise one degree higher, it becomes dubious and vacillating.³⁵

These principles, of course, are quite alien to the modern mentality. They are likely to provoke all kinds of quite irrelevant responses about the material inadequacies of traditional cosmologies - geocentrism, for example. Later we shall see how the traditionalist vision of both traditional and modern science cannot be so easily brushed aside.

The Reign of Quantity also seeks to demonstrate the intimate connections between traditional metaphysics and the arts, crafts and sciences which are found in any traditional culture, and to show how many modern and profane sciences are really a kind of degenerated caricature of traditional sciences.³⁶ Such a demonstration turns largely on Guénon's explanation of the nature of symbolism and of the initiatic character of many traditional sciences.

What of the qualities of mind and temperament revealed in Guénon's writings? Marco Pallis wrote of Guénon

...a mind of phenomenal lucidity of a kind one can best describe as "mathematical" in its apparent detachment from anything savouring of aesthetic or even moral considerations; his criteria of what was right and what was inadmissible remained wholly intellectual ones needing no considerations drawn from a different order of reality to reinforce them - their own self-evidence sufficed.³⁷

Another commentator speaks of Guénon's exposition as "so crystalline and geometric, so mathematically abstract and devoid of almost any human element"³⁸ while Gai Eaton notes that "in him the blade of French intellectuality is tempered to a razor-sharp edge".³⁹ Theodore Roszak writes of his "keen, spiritual discrimination"⁴⁰ while

33 For some discussion of the "fissures" in modern science see J. Needleman *A Sense of the Cosmos* Doubleday, New York, 1975 and T. Roszak *Where the Wasteland Ends* Doubleday, New York, 1972. For a traditionalist critique which follows on from Guénon see Section 1 of T. Burckhardt *Mirror of the Intellect* Quinta Essentia, Cambridge, 1987/SUNY, Albany, 1987. On the "new physics" see F. Capra *The Tao of Physics* Fontana, London, 1976. See also SHN *K&S* pp114ff. See also Wolfgang Smith *Cosmos and Transcendence* Sherwood Sugden & Co, La Salle, 1984, and *The Quantum Enigma* Sherwood Sugden & Co, La Salle, 1995.

34 This passage is quoted in G. Eaton: *op.cit.*; p196. The source is not given but for a more extended discussion of precisely this contrast see RG *CMW* Ch. IV, "Sacred and Profane Science"; pp37-50.

35 Quoted in W.T. Chan: "The Unity of East and West" in W.R. Inge et al *Radhakrishnan: Comparative Studies in Philosophy Presented in Honour of His Sixtieth Birthday* Allen & Unwin, London, 1951; pp107-108. (This passage is from "Orient et Occident").

36 See RG *RQ* p14.

37 M. Pallis: "A Fateful Meeting of Minds" p178. The word "intellectual" in this passage does not mean "mental" but refers to the intellect as understood in medieval scholasticism, the faculty of transcendent realisation. See Chapter 8.

38 W. Perry: "Coomaraswamy" p163. See also W. Perry: "The Revival of Interest in Tradition" p11.

39 G. Eaton: *op.cit.*; p184.

40 T. Roszak: *Unfinished Animal* Harper & Row, New York, 1977; p15.

Schuon, referring to the absence of any sentimental or even psychic dimension in Guénon's work, once used the image of "an eye without a body".⁴¹

These images of sharpness, of a finely-honed cutting edge, a mathematical precision and incisive penetration all testify to Guénon's clarity of thought in his metaphysical expositions and his pitiless exposure of the "signs of the times". Nonetheless, Guénon's work is by no means easy to assimilate. Gai Eaton, despite his admiration of Guénon, concedes that "It is questionable whether anyone with the normal tastes and intellectual background of our day can approach Guénon's work for the first time without a sense of revulsion."⁴² Why so?

Firstly there is the substance of Guénon's work. It is not easy of access and, at first sight, often strange, startling, baffling. His premises are too radically at odds with conventional wisdom for him to gain any easy following. His critique of European civilisation is so ruthless, so unnerving in its implications that it often provokes a kind of defensive reflex, an emotional and intellectual resistance which makes for a failure to engage with what is actually being said. Without the right kind of predisposition the reader is unlikely to recover from the initial shock. An acceptance of Guénon's general thesis also entails a drastic intellectual and existential adjustment for most readers which very few are willing to make. André Gide typified this kind of response to Guénon's work when he wrote:

If only I had known Guénon is my youth!... Now it is too late; the die is cast. My sclerosed mind has as much difficulty conforming to the precepts of that ancestral wisdom as my body has to the so-called "comfortable" position recommended by the Yogis... To tell the truth, I cannot even manage really to desire resorption of the individual into the Eternal Being they seek... I cling desperately to my limits and feel a repugnance for the disappearance of those contours that my whole education made a point of defining... I am and remain on the side of Descartes and of Bacon. None the less, those books of Guénon are remarkable...⁴³

This is very much to the point. Guénon's vision cannot be accepted "a little". One might, of course, disagree over details but his fundamental premises must be either accepted or rejected. There is nothing of the *smörgåsbord* in Guénon's writings.

Then, also, there is Guénon's claim to being a mouthpiece for a metaphysical vision or *theoria* which is beyond the reach of "proof", even of debate. Take for instance, the following:

Those who are qualified to speak in the name of a traditional doctrine are not required to enter into discussion with the "profane" or to engage in polemics: it is for them simply to expound the doctrine such as it is, for the sake of those capable of understanding it, and at the same time to denounce error wherever it arises... their function is not to engage in strife and in doing so to compromise the doctrine, but to pronounce the judgement which they have the right to pronounce if they are in effective possession of the principles which should inspire them infallibly.⁴⁴

Such a passage is likely, to say the least, to stick in the craw of many contemporary scholars for reasons obvious enough. For Guénon a genuine understanding of metaphysical principles represented a "permanent and changeless certitude" which left no room for debate: one either understood these principles or one did not. Guénon was not bent on "proving" anything whatsoever, only on making traditional doctrines more intelligible.

Hand in hand with this perception of his role went a tone of implacable certitude, all too easily seen as a kind of intellectual arrogance. Roszak, for example, speaks of "a mind whose very precision led to an aristocratic intolerance and an elitism that risked sterility"⁴⁵. Roger Lipsey refers to Guénon's "formidably intolerant"⁴⁶ attitude to the modern West while Pallis writes of his "habitually hectoring tone...adopted in regard to people whose views he disapproved of".⁴⁷ Bernard Kelly refers to the "withering, intransigent, unbending" tone of Guénon's writings.⁴⁸ Jacques Lacarriere has regretted Guénon's "aristocratism, his exclusive attachment to esoterism, his arbitrary rejection - and at times indeed, his faulty knowledge - of contemporary philosophies, plus his ferocious intellectualism".⁴⁹

There is in Guénon's work an adamant quality, an austerity and inflexibility, and a combative tone as well as his "icy brilliance".⁵⁰ He was not one to coax, cajole or seduce his readers. He wrote as a man convinced he was in possession of timeless truths and he will brook no compromises. There is no concession to alternative points of view, no sense of a dialogue with his readers, no hospitality to any ideas at odds with those he is

41 Quoted in W. Perry: "Coomaraswamy" p163. For photographs of Guénon see P. Charconac: *op.cit.*; facing p320; SS *ACRR* p223; and in *TOMORROW* accompanying his article "Oriental Metaphysics", Vol XII, i, 1964; pp10, 13, 15; and in RF *UT* p xv.

42 G. Eaton: *op.cit.*; p184.

43 A. Gide *The Journals of André Gide* Vol IV, 1939-1949; Secker & Warburg, London, 1951, tr. J. O'Brien; entry for October, 1943; p226.

44 RG *CMW* p65.

45 T. Roszak: *op.cit.*; p15.

46 R. Lipsey *CLW* p273.

47 M. Pallis: Letter to the Editor, *SCR* I, i, 1967; pp47-48

48 B. Kelly: "Notes on the Light of Eastern Religions" in *RH* p160.

49 J. Lacarriere *The Gnostics* Peter Owen, London, 1977; p126.

50 G. Eaton: *op.cit.*; p183.

expressing. Something of Guénon's unyielding posture is evinced in the following passage (and it needs be remembered that he is writing in the 1920s):

...hitherto, so far as we are aware, no one else beside ourselves has consistently expounded authentic Oriental ideas in the West; and we have done so... without the slightest wish to propagandize or to popularize, and exclusively for the benefit of those who are able to understand the doctrines just as they stand, and not after they have been denatured on the plea of making them more readily acceptable...⁵¹

In an unusually personal vein he reprimanded a critic who had suggested that Guénon had "passed" from Hinduism to Islam:

We have never "passed" from one thing to another, as all our writings abundantly prove; and we have no need to "seek the truth" since we know (and we must insist upon this word) that it exists equally in all traditions...⁵²

Doubtless, for many contemporaries such claims smack of extravagant confidence. However, the crucial point is this: to be offended by Guénon's "arrogance" and to invalidate his message are two quite different matters. It is to the latter purpose that Guénon's would-be critics ought to address themselves. One should also perhaps add that in these times of a full-scale relativism any claim to certitude is likely to be dismissed, without any further consideration, as "fanaticism" or some such. Looked at from another angle Guénon's militant posture is nothing other than an expression of his fierce commitment to the truth and it is precisely his refusal to compromise first principles which gives his work its power and integrity.⁵³

Another factor helps to explain Guénon's comparative obscurity in the West: his methodology and his attitude to scholarship. We have already seen how, for Guénon, metaphysical principles were self-evident and self-authenticating. This poses a problem for the scholarly mind. However, the problem runs deeper than this. If it were simply a matter of Guénon working from the basis of certain clearly-stated premises there would be no more reason to reject his work than that of many a philosopher or theologian. No, the fact is that Guénon was, in Whitall Perry's words, "somewhat slipshod in scholarship":

his certitude about principles lent a false sense of security on the factual level, where a little research would have sufficed to protect him from the barbs of orientalists who, if incognizant of metaphysical and spiritual truths, had at least done their homework.⁵⁴

Guénon was never primarily a scholar. Father Sylvain Lévi, to whom Guénon submitted a draft of *Introduction générale* as a possible doctoral thesis, recommended its rejection on the grounds that

Il entend exclure tous les éléments qui ne correspondent pas à sa conception...tout est dans le Vedanta...il fait bon marché de l'histoire et de la critique historique...il est tout prêt à croire à une transmission mystique d'une vérité première apparue au génie humain dès les premiers âges du monde...⁵⁵

This is not unjust. However, while Guénon can reasonably be reproached with a failure to "do his homework" on the empirical and historical level, we must remember that he was a metaphysician concerned with first principles. If his application of these principles to contingent phenomena sometimes left room for a more scrupulous scholarship then this is indeed regrettable but it leaves the principles themselves quite unaffected.⁵⁶ This is sometimes forgotten by those who wish to force Guénon into the mould of the historian, the sociologist, the anthropologist or the comparative religionist.

Guénon was quite out of sympathy with the prevailing ideals of academic scholarship. Nothing could have been further removed from the spirit of his work than the notion of scholarship for its own sake. "Passion for research", he said, "taken as an end in itself is mental restlessness without end and without issue".⁵⁷ As Roger Lipsey remarked, Guénon kept his distance from the academic intelligentsia: "he mistrusted the academic mind and received abundant mistrust in return".⁵⁸

All of these factors conspired to limit Guénon's appeal. However, while his influence remains fairly minimal in the Western academic community at large, he is *the* seminal influence in the development of traditionalism. Along with Coomaraswamy and Schuon he forms what one commentator has called "the great triumvirate" of

51 RG *CMW* p103.

52 Quoted in G. Eaton: *op.cit.*; p185.

53 See I.R. Tucker: Letter to the Editor, *SCR* I, iii, 1967; pp141-144. (It was precisely Guénon's refusal to make concessions which Coomaraswamy much admired. See Letter to Paul Furfey, undated, AKC *SL* p158.)

54 W. Perry: "Coomaraswamy" p160

55 Quoted in J.P. Laurant: *op.cit.*; p43. (Translation: He intentionally excludes all the elements which do not correspond to his conception... all is in the Vedanta... he lightly dismisses history and historical criticism... he is entirely ready to believe in a mystical transmission of a primordial truth which appeared to humanity in the earliest ages of the world.)

56 Furthermore, as Schuon has pointed out, "...one may have an intuition for pure principles without having one for a given phenomenal order, that is to say, without being able to apply the principles spontaneously in such and such a domain". FS *SVQ* p128.

57 From "Orient et Occident" per WP *TTW* p. 732.

58 RL *CLW* p272.

the traditionalist school.⁵⁹ By way of concluding this introduction to Guénon we shall briefly consider his own perception of his role and the way in which he is seen by other traditionalists.

For those who accept Guénon's premises his work is a voice crying in the European wilderness. However, as both Schuon and Perry have stressed, Guénon's function cannot strictly be termed "prophetic", the age of prophecy being over. Schuon:

If on the doctrinal plane the Guénonian work has a stamp of unicity, it may not be useless to point out that this is owing not to a more or less "prophetic" nature - a supposition that is excluded and which Guénon had already rejected beforehand - but to an exceptional cyclical conjuncture whose temporal aspect is this "end of the world" in which we live, and whose spatial aspect is - by the same token - the forced convergence of civilisations.⁶⁰

We have already met with Michel Valsan's contention to the same effect. Guénon himself did not doubt that he had access to the *sophia perennis* about which he wrote. In a conversation with Dr. Grangier in 1927 Guénon spoke of the wisdom to which he gave expression as "*impersonnelle, d'origine divine, transmise par révélation, détachée et sans passion*".⁶¹ Although certain of his own intellectual realization of the truth Guénon never assumed the role of the spiritual master; he consistently refused those who requested initiation from him.⁶²

Like other traditionalists, Guénon did not perceive his work as any kind of essay in creativity or personal "originality", repeatedly emphasising that in the metaphysical domain there was no room for "individualist considerations" of any kind. In a letter to a friend he wrote, "I have no other merit than to have expressed to the best of my ability some traditional ideas."⁶³ When reminded of the people who had been profoundly influenced by his writings he calmly replied, "...such disposition becomes a homage rendered to the doctrine expressed by us in a way which is totally independent of any individualistic consideration...".⁶⁴ Like Coomaraswamy, Guénon certainly did not see himself building a new philosophy or creating a new school of thought. If it is sometimes necessary to speak of the traditionalist "school" this is, from a traditionalist viewpoint, merely an expedient. For the traditionalists Guénon is the "providential interpreter of this age".⁶⁵ It was his role to remind a forgetful world, "in a way that can be ignored but not refuted", of first principles and to restore a lost sense of the Absolute".⁶⁶

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⁵⁹ E.J. Sharpe *Comparative Religion* Duckworth, London, 1975; p265.

⁶⁰ From F. Schuon: "L'Oeuvre" per W.Perry: "Coomaraswamy" p160. For some reflections by Frithjof Schuon on Guénon see "Definitions" in *Sophia* I, ii, Winter 1995; and Schuon's contributions to *Les Dossiers H: René Guénon* ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne, 1984, and *L'Herne: René Guénon* ed. Jean-Pierre Laurant, Les Editions de l'Herne, Paris, 1985 (which also includes a letter from Guénon to Schuon, 16th April, 1946).

⁶¹ From T. Grangier *Souvenirs sur René Guénon* quoted by J.P. Laurant: *op.cit.*; p58.

⁶² See J.P. Laurant: *op.cit.*; pp62-64. For a traditionalist understanding of the term "spiritual master" see F. Schuon: "Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master" *SCR* I, ii, 1967; pp50-59.

⁶³ W. Perry: "The Man and His Witness" p7.

⁶⁴ M. Bastriocchi: *op.cit.*; p356.

⁶⁵ F. Schuon: "L'Oeuvre", quoted by M. Bastriocchi: *op.cit.*; p359.

⁶⁶ W. Perry: "Coomaraswamy" p163.